WHEN IS THE END NOT THE END?

Easter Sunday, March 31, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 25:6-9
Mark 16:1-8

"So they went out and fled from the tomb...and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." -Mark 16:8 (NRSV)

There is one experience a minister doesn't know a thing about. And that is what Sunday morning feels like for most people. It's now something of a running joke in our family. I have these lovely, nostalgic memories of looking out from the chancel and seeing my family sitting there in the pew, a Norman Rockwell picture, titled "Easter Morning," on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post. Whenever the subject comes up and I border on sentiment, the people in the picture, however, roll their eyes, and in unison say, "If you only knew."

So we don't know. We've been thinking about it all week. We've been planning and preparing and focusing on it. With services at 6:30, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m., and 6:30 p.m., today is the ecclesiastical equivalent of March Madness - The Final Four. And we don't know a thing about how it is to walk in here fairly innocently on a Sunday morning.

We do know that more of you come today than on any other Sunday of the year, which some people have been known to disparage, but not me. If you only come once a year this is the day to do it. Except we know that we don't have enough seats or hymnals or Bibles and and that some will walk in innocently enough and be shunted off to another place, to watch closed circuit TV. And so, there are people in Blair Chapel and Flynn Hall - which is not at all a worship space. It is a challenge to be an usher at this church this Sunday.

Walter Brueggemann, in a recent book, Finally Come the Poet, begins with an intriguing analysis of people who go to church on Sunday morning:

> "There is a casual, indifferent readiness, to grant the main claims of the gospel - not to grant them importance, but to accept them... The Gospel is then a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. 'It is,' he says, 'an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned.'" [p. 1]

The last chapter in Mr. Bridge, one of Evan Connell's pair of novels about life in middle America, has Mr. Bridge sitting in church:

> "Every few months, according to the wishes of his wife, he found himself in church. Usually he agreed to go on Easter and once around Christmas. In church he behaved very nearly as she hoped he would. He waited inexpressively through the sermon, held the hymnal, and more or less pretended to sing along with her, contributed a dollar when the plate came down the pew (that's a pre-inflation dollar, by the way) and lowered his head enough to remain inconspicuous when Dr. Foster summoned the congregation to prayer, although he refused to shut his eyes. And he often consulted his watch as though by this he could bring forth the welcome notes of the recessional."

"Mr. and Mrs. Bridge" is a movie of two people who lead lives of quiet determination, obsessed with security, convention and not ever, under any circumstance, diverging from what their Midwestern, middle-class culture expects of them. They live by rote, by a script handed to them by the culture. They are comfortable, predictable: loving but with diminishing passion. Life is flat.

What happens to Mr. Bridge in church is how they live. And, Connell is suggesting that life flattens out for most of us.

Mr. Bridge is there in his pew on Christmas Sunday and significantly, this is how the novel concludes:

The closing hymn is "Joy to the World" and as he stands there, holding the hymnal, he reflects:

> "Evidently they had experienced joy or believed they had experienced it. He asked himself if he ever had known it. If so, he could not remember... satisfaction, yes and pleasure of several sorts and pride, enthusiasm, cheerfulness, joviality, gratification, gladness. But not joy. No, that belonged to simpler minds." [p. 367]

Mr. Bridge sitting in church may epitomize something that happens to all of us to an extent - a kind of flatness, a weariness from living that has caused us to shut the windows of our spirits.

It's not just religion, of course. As years turn into decades and the decades accumulate, a funny thing happens to us. We begin to withdraw and reduce our horizons and our hopes. We insulate ourselves from danger, physical, emotional and financial. We may have welcomed adventure once; now we seek security. Grand and noble dreams are discarded. Passion is put on hold and life flattens out.

It's not a new observation, of course. The haunting prologue to the Book of Ecclesiastes, for instance:

"Vanities of vanities, all is vanity...
A generation goes, a generation comes.
The sun rises, the sun goes down...
There is nothing new under the sun."

And what a great but haunting, disturbing moment it is when at the beginning of that magnificent tale of passion and tragedy, Hamlet looks at the audience and says:

"O, that this too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into dew...
O God! O God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
seem to me all the uses of the world."
[Act 1, Scene 2, line 129]

While most of us don't get caught in the brittle dryness of Mr. and Mrs. Bridge's guile, and while most of us do not experience the web of passion and violence which Shakespeare spun, we do, I think, know about a life that at least on occasion feels weary, flat, stale and unprofitable.

Nothing new under the sun. Satisfaction yes, not joy. Casual indifference... What are these people talking about. Add in Thoreau's famous observation that most people lead lives of quiet desperation, and you have a compelling argument that life itself wears down the human spirit.

"Tell me something new," we ask the preacher, beneath the polite facade of piety on Sunday morning. Tell me something, Professor Brueggemann pleads, that will bring me "out from behind my desk, my stethoscope, my uniform, my competence, my credentials, my fears, to meet life a little more boldly." [op. cit., p. 11]

I think that's why we are all here this morning - out of the hope, maybe even a last, desperate hope that there will be something new, something breathtaking. And I believe we come, all of us, on this day, not to be seen, because you don't have to be seen here any longer. And given the vicissitudes of Chicago weather - snow yesterday, rain and sleet this morning - buying a spring frock or a hat without ear muffs is very risky business. It requires creativity and courage to buy and wear Easter clothes in Chicago. I think we come here this day, even if we never come on any other day, because we know intuitively that this is it: this is the day the Christian faith actually says something new and bold and blood-stirring and startling.

This day is about something so powerful that every time we try to talk about it we stutter and become tongue-tied and it never comes out quite the way we mean it.

It's been a problem with this day from the beginning. If you read along during the Second Lesson you noticed a kind of literary mess on page 55 of the New Testament, the sixteenth and final chapter of Mark. I wouldn't mind if you got it out and looked again.

It's the Easter story, but on page 55 you'll notice it says, "The shorter ending of Mark" and then, "The longer ending of Mark"; and then on the next page a full half-column of footnotes which is a good indication that Biblical scholars have had a whole lot of trouble with this section.

Almost everybody agrees that the Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the accounts of Jesus' life to be written. The assumption is that when it comes to historic details, Mark is the most accurate. And the trouble is that when it comes to Easter morning Mark is simply stingy. He doesn't say much.

Three women come to the tomb to anoint the body, the same three who were there when he died and who watched as he was buried. These are faithful, fearless women. When everybody else flees, they stay with him. Realistic, too. They are not coming to the grave for any reason other than to do what has to be done to a dead body for aesthetic reasons. They are worried, not about a resurrection, but a realistic detail: how are they going to get in? Who will move the stone? When they arrive, the stone has been moved. A young man tells them Jesus isn't there, but is risen and if they want to see him again they'll have to go to Galilee. The young man tells them to find the other disciples and Peter and let them know. And that's it, except for the real problem and that's the last verse in the oldest manuscripts - verse eight.

> "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

That's the last thing Mark has to say about the Resurrection of Jesus - "they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid."

And it's not even that neat. The people who really know, who can translate the ancient Greek from the very oldest manuscripts available know that there is a real puzzle here. The last sentence is not complete. Our English Bible cleans it up, but this is what the Greek really says: "terror and amazement had seized them for..." It ends with an elipsis, a particle which begins a phrase that isn't there. It's an end that really isn't an end.

And so the scholarly argument has raged. Is the original conclusion lost? Did it get torn off when some early scribe rolled up the scroll one night? Or was Mark just finishing up his account when the soldiers broke into his hiding place and hauled him off to prison? I like that one. Or, did the author do it this way on purpose? Did he take it as far as he could go and then realize that if this story was going to reflect his experience, the experience of those early friends and followers of Jesus, it had to get off the dusty pages of an ancient manuscript and into the life of the person reading it later, maybe twenty centuries later? The last line would have to be incomplete.

I think he meant it, meant to end with a sentence that invites the reader to fill in the conclusion: a literary device that forces attention away from the past and into the future.

That's what the young man says to the women, realistically going about their duties. He is not in here. He is not in a cemetery. He is not in the past. He is not even in your blessed customs or the sacred traditions you are just about to start creating. He isn't even here in this text... - Mark is shouting to all the literalists he knew would fawn over these words across the years. He's out in the world - ahead of you in Galilee and you're going to have to get moving if you wish to see him. What a magnificent thought: the focus of faith is ahead not behind! The job of the church is not to preserve tradition but to scurry after its Lord who is ahead in the world!

John Updike notes, in his reflections on his own spiritual journey that, "for many people, work is the effective religion, a ritual occupation and inflexible orientation which permits them to imagine that the problem of their personal death has been solved." [Self-Consciousness, p. 228]

That's Mr. Bridge. That's a whole host of Updike characters. That's a culture that promises security and immortality if you just earn enough to buy enough.

It's the women at the tomb, doing what has to be done in the face of this gross reminder of death. That's you and me and everyone who ever lived, working, day in and day out, doing what we have to do, doing what someone has to do. And it's in the middle of that stale, flat, weary, predictable, deadly duty, that a new word is spoken. **He is not here. He is risen. He is going ahead of you.**

But this story that doesn't have an end, and is not an easy story, does not begin on a bright spring morning. This story begins on a Friday afternoon with dark clouds descending and a cold wind blowing, and an innocent young man dying. The Chaplain at Duke, William Willimon, wants to put a sign up every Easter morning outside the church that says, "No one gets in who wasn't here Friday."

The truth is, you don't understand this business until you've lived through Friday. The deeper truth is that we have, all of us and each of us, lived through Good Friday. The truth is that our intellectual and spiritual maturity starts with what Good Friday represents, namely the reality of death and tragedy and evil. Live a few decades and see your heroes and heroines fall. Live a few more decades and your parents die, and a few more and your friends start to die and the Requiem Masses you used to listen to as great music start to become deeply spiritual experiences for you - "Grant them rest eternal and light perpetual shine on them forever" - and you find that your eyes are brimming with tears. Live a few decades and discover that within every human enterprise there is always at least ambiguity and usually the potential of tragedy and death... Love your country, love freedom and hate oppression, send the troops to defeat the cruel dictator and then slowly understand that 100,000 Iraqis, precious young men, dear old people, beautiful children died. "O God! O God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable..."

O God, protect us from that, from that harsh reality of life, from death, from the horror of Good Friday and the pain of all the Good Fridays we face.

And on this day, we have the nerve to turn to the page which says, with elegant simplicity:

> "He is not here. He is risen. He is going ahead of you."

This is no inane yarn about the daffodils appearing in springtime. This is the story of an innocent young man who was framed, tried in a kangaroo court, and publicly executed.

The worst that could happen happened. God's own son was victimized by human pettiness and greed. God's incarnate love was nailed to a cross by cynical politicians, soldiers doing their duty, arrogant clergy and indifferent people. Life happened. Death happened. There is nothing new under the sun. How weary, stale and flat. But then...life conquered. Life was given again. Jesus the Christ was not in the tomb.

"He is ahead of you," the young man said. While you're doing your duty, living out your time, he is in the world. He is wherever love overcomes hatred and life will not succumb to death. He is wherever kindness and generosity are expressed, where the sick are healed and the lonely embraced. He is wherever the outsiders are welcomed and the unloved are loved. He is wherever the frightened are encouraged, the oppressed are given strength and the dying held tightly. He is always before us...

He is going head of you. Do you hear that? He is going ahead of you into your future. Hans Kung, a distinguished academician, put that with simplicity:

> "God is God of the end as well as the beginning." [Eternal Life, p. 114]

God spoke the first word about us. God will speak the last word about us.

And in the meantime there is a startling, new reality which flies in the face of the weary, stale, flat, quiet desperation of life. In the meantime there is this ending which is not the end at all but the beginning, this new word which whenever it is said this day, and heard, begins to feel like hope and courage and joy...

> "He is not here. He is going ahead of you."

Jesus Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed!

Amen.